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# How are Social Problems Viewed and Analyzed in Social Work Policy Textbooks?

Marietta A. Barrett

Long Island University Post

*This article reviews seven of the most frequently used policy textbooks in social work and examines how social problems are viewed in the narrative, and then analyzed in policy analysis frameworks. Questions include: (1) how the authors define social problems; (2) who they say "gets" to define problems in policy analysis; (3) how problems should be analyzed; and (4) whether contextual influences on the problem are considered. Findings include that most authors argue that social problems are constructions in their narratives, but do not transfer that perspective into their policy analysis frameworks. Implications for education and policy practice are explored.*

*Key words: Social problems, social policy analysis, social work policy textbooks, social constructionism*

Policy analysis is a required competency of students in the social work curriculum (Council on Social Work Education, 2015, p. 8), and social policy textbooks widely accommodate students by offering various frameworks and analytical tools to conduct policy analysis (Weiss, Gal, & Katan, 2005). However, the term "policy analysis" tends to be "used in vague and inconsistent ways" (Poppo & Leigninger, 2015, p. 36), and may refer to any one or a combination of: (1) a process, or the sociopolitical dynamics of policy formulation; (2) a product, or the policy and its contents that results from the policy process; and/or (3) performance, the evaluation of the outcomes of an implemented policy (Gilbert & Terell, 2005). Since the unit of analysis may be any one or more of the three above, authors prescribe varying approaches, each serving a different purpose (Poppo & Leigninger, 2015).

Pal (2006) states that "there is universal agreement that

the key factor [in policy analysis] is the problem or at least the definition of a situation considered problematic" (p. 97). Policy authors generally agree that "effective social policy is built on the cornerstone of careful problem definition" (Chapin, 1995, p. 506) and that a "definition of the problem is at the heart of the policy, the key to understanding its logic" (Popple & Leigninger, 2015, p. 79). Though social problems are considered critical antecedents to policy, in policy analysis, they are typically not viewed or analyzed in the same manner as the policies themselves. While contextual influences such as power, ideology and special interests may be central to discussions on how policies are formulated (e.g., Dye, 2012; Kingdon, 2011), they are usually not considered central to how problems are formulated. In analytical frameworks, a number of discrete, basic questions tend to guide problem analysis (e.g., Cummins, Beyers, & Pedrick, 2011, pp. 222-226; DiNitto & Johnson, 2012, pp. 28-29), while questions investigating the policy lean toward nuance and critique. Some policy authors may include little to no discussion of the problem's place at all in policy analysis (e.g., Caputo, 2014; Gilbert & Terrell, 2005). Additionally, while policy making is recognized as messy and pluralistic (Chapin, 2014), taking place in an arena of competing interests (Segal, 2013), problem construction is not equally presented as contentious and discursive.

The purpose of this study is to analyze a sample of the most frequently adopted social work policy textbooks with regard to how social problems are viewed in the narrative of the textbook and in the policy analysis frameworks the author offers. Textbooks were selected as the source of analysis in this study because they provide theories and frameworks generally regarded by students as authoritative sources of expert knowledge (Tompkins, Rosen, & Larkin, 2006), and convey explicit and implicit ideological content (Ephross & Reisch, 1982). Since educators frequently use them as a foundation for determining critical content areas in course planning (Kramer, Hovland-Scarfe, & Pacourek, 2003), an analysis of how problems are viewed in policy textbooks could yield valuable information about how social work educators (and by extension, the profession) are preparing students for policy analysis, and what the implications are for clients and policy practice. To date, the author could not locate any studies assessing how

problems are viewed in social work policy texts.

### Competing Perspectives on Social Problems

The problem definition phase of policy analysis is described as complex and often daunting (e.g., Popple & Leighninger, 2015, p. 79). Ginsburg and Miller-Cribbs (2005, pp. 56-57) present two sociological definitions of social problems to guide policy analysis. The first, from Maris (1988, p. 6), asserts that:

social problems can be defined as general patterns of human behavior or social conditions that are perceived to be threats to society by significant numbers of the population, powerful groups, or charismatic individuals and that could be resolved or remedied.

The second, from Barker (2003), sees social problems as "conditions between people leading to social responses that violate some people's values and norms and cause emotional or economic suffering" (p. 405). Earlier in time, Mills (1959) made the distinction between private troubles and public issues; the latter become social problems when they affect large numbers of people and "when society as represented by government, sees the troubles as a threat..." (Ginsburg & Miller-Cribbs, 2005, p. 57). The definitions presented above fit the primary, predominant view of social problems, called the objectivist view (also referred to as the rationalist or structural functionalist view). In the pursuit of a scientific analysis, sociologists treated social problems as consisting of a number of objective, measurable characteristics, such as how many people the problem affects, the degree of severity, a typology of the problem, and an explanation for how and why the problem occurs (Blumer, 1971). Objectivism assumes that definitions of problems remain relatively stable over time, and frameworks based on this view largely fail to account for the plastic, politically-charged context within which they emerge and are deemed worthy of attention (Best, 1995).

Alternately, social constructionism espouses a subjective view of reality (Clarke, 2001), relegating a central, critical role to the process of constructing, producing and circulating meanings. It assumes that reality and its dimensions cannot be

understood directly without first being assigned meaning. That meaning is assigned by someone or some influential group who relegates phenomena or experience to a specific place in the social order and determines its level of importance. This perspective argues that social problems are not conditions or products, but instead interpretive and dynamic processes (Best, 1995; Spector & Kituse, 1977). Defined as "the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions" (Spector & Kituse, 2001, p. 75), social problems cannot exist apart from their constructions (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). The social constructionist perspective starts by asking how and why some conditions come to be defined as social problems and others do not, and why a particular problem emerges or reemerges at a particular point in time. While social constructionists do not deny the existence of objectionable conditions, they are more concerned with how those conditions are represented by certain individuals or groups, known as claimsmakers, through their claims. Constructionists aver that any attempt to deal with problems, especially in discourse, imposes an interpretation upon them, which includes value judgments, assumptions and causal explanations (Bacchi, 2007). The political interchange that historically occurs between competing claimsmakers both reflects and shapes social order (Clarke, 2001).

According to this view, problems and policies could never be considered value-neutral; they are socially constructed according to the interests and ideology of those most influential in making claims at the time. Similarly, they are never objective and static; history instructs that what is collectively considered a social problem and what should be done about it shifts over time depending on a confluence of cultural, political and economic forces (Blumer, 1971). Becker (1963) fleshed out the temporal nature of problem definition in his assertion that deviance is a social construction. He argued that behavior that is viewed or classified as deviant is context-specific and varies during different historical periods and across different societies. Indeed, a number of articles analyzing problems from a social constructionist perspective often include "the medicalization of deviance" (Conrad & Schneider, 1980). These articles focus on the process whereby certain behaviors, often previously considered immoral or criminal, become defined as a

disease, codified and treated by the medical establishment.

### Social Constructionism and Social Work

Some social work scholars have critiqued the rational, functionalist framework and its implications for social work knowledge, practice and policy. O'Connor and Netting (2008) argue that rational, functionalist frameworks are based on the faulty assumption that the world is orderly, that it can be broken down into discrete variables, and that it can be known and controlled through utilizing the scientific method. Weick (1993), East (1998), and McPhee and Bronstein (2002) criticize social work's alignment with a positivist model of knowing which subsumes an elitist value system where the social worker as expert is deemed the legitimate authority to determine the diagnosis and treatment of clients' problems, while clients are subjugated as recipients of services and marginalized from the process.

In the same vein, the tenets of social constructionism have been recognized and applauded by some in social work. Danto (2008), Laird (1993), and Weick (1993) argued for a social constructionist perspective in social work education. Sahin (2006) argued social constructionism's consonance with the values and mission of the social work profession, and Chapin (2014) and Weick (1992) emphasized social constructionism's compatibility with the strengths perspective. Dybicz (2011) defended social constructionism as a guiding framework when using consciousness-raising to construct alternate, less oppressive identities and realities for clients. Dean (1993), in her constructivist endorsement of clinical practice, recommends substituting the term "collaborative inquiry" for assessment. McVinney (2004) asserts that just as social constructionism is critical for analyzing "historical attempts to objectify individuals ... through language and narratives" (p. 6), so is deconstruction necessary for analyzing seemingly objective and absolute truths that are inherent in the language and labeling of those affected by social problems. Deconstruction has also been applied to critiquing the language used in social policy, and exposing implicit constructions of power, hierarchy and marginalization therein (Danto, 2008). Feminist policy analysts also emphasize the importance of deconstruction in the

analysis of discourse in shaping issues, how language is used to shape and hide (gendered) assumptions about a problem, how "women's problems" such as inequality, pay equity, child care, domestic violence, and sexual harassment are currently and historically represented in policy proposals, and most importantly, the consideration of alternate representations of the problem for future policy (Bacchi, 2007; McPhail, 2003).

### Social Work Policy Authors and Social Problems

The results of a cursory examination of randomly selected policy texts informed the question that titles this inquiry. They indicated that some authors affirm the subjective nature of social problems in their narratives, while prescribing the use of objectivist criteria to analyze problems in policies. For example, Jansson (2008) noted that social problems were "slippery concepts" (p. 248), or ambiguous constructs that assumed meaning at certain periods of time and not others depending on whether an intervention or solution was available to address it. Rather than transferring this perspective into his six-step policy analysis framework (p. 216), he instead recommends reliance on the expert literature to define and describe social problems. This entails asking a series of objective questions about: (1) the types of factors leading to the problem; (2) the current remedies or solutions that exist to address the problem; (3) the extent, origin, and adequacy of expenditures on the problem; and (4) the negative implications of the problem for specific persons or populations.

In an allusion to social constructionism, Cummins, Byers, and Pedrick (2011) assert that "(s)ocial problems evolve over time, necessitating an ongoing evolution of policy responses" (p. 224), and "(t)he differences in the causes of social problems in different historical eras demand different policy responses" (p. 224). However, the authors propose a number of objectivist criteria for analyzing social problems, including the nature of the problem, when it emerged, what it looks like, signs and symptoms, who it affects, levels of severity, antecedent events, consequences of the antecedent events, and whether or not they both vary by target population (p. 224). Similarly, Chambers and Wedel (2005) assert that how problems are perceived and explained is highly variable depending on the

viewer. "To understand a social problem is to understand how and what another person [or group] thinks and believes about the social events being defined as a problem" (p. 8). The authors' four dimensions for social problem analysis are compatible with a constructionist view. However, when applying these dimensions to their policy analysis of selected features of federal child welfare legislation (pp. 215-237), they recommend deferring to the "expert" literature: government documents; research reports; the professional journal literature; and legislative briefs to determine the social problem context. For the social problem definition, they recommend selecting from the literature and using national data to determine the problem's scope.

Thus, though many policy authors in social work may concede that social problems: are constructions or inventions (e.g., Chapin, 2014, p. 122; Jansson, 2008); that "many factors come into play before a social problem is recognized as a social problem" (Cummins et al., 2011, p. 222); that public perceptions and beliefs about problems are more influential than objective reality (Barusch, 2015); "that social welfare policies are hypothetical solutions to perceived social problems" (Popple & Leighninger, 2015, p. 79), and that "political ideology and special interests, the mass media, and public opinion all play roles in problem identification" (DiNitto & Johnson, 2012, p. 13), tensions often exist between these assertions and how authors direct students to view social problems in policy analysis frameworks.

### Content Analysis of Social Work Textbooks: A Brief Review of the Literature

The author was able to locate only a limited number of content analyses of social work textbooks. Of these, content analyses have been conducted in introductory social work texts (e.g., Giesler, 2015; Strier, Feldman, & Shdaimah, 2012; Wachholz & Mullaly, 2000) and foundation social work texts (e.g., Kramer et al., 2003; Tompkins et al., 2006). A composite review of social work research textbooks (Patterson, 2010); and one on content in school social work textbooks (Stone & Gambrill, 2007) were also located. Some content analyses were conducted in Human Behavior and the Social Environment

(HBSE) textbooks (e.g., Lee & Hernandez, 2009; Reid-Cunningham & Fleming, 2009) including an in-depth typology and content analysis of 14 HBSE texts characterizing general content, general and specific social environment content, and the extent of focus on social justice and social problems (Taylor, Mulroy, & Austin, 2004). Only one content analysis of social work policy textbooks was located, and this analysis was ancillary to the primary analysis of HBSE textbooks (Lehning, Vu, & Pintak, 2007). This study analyzed poverty content in 14 frequently assigned HBSE textbooks and the five most frequently updated editions of social welfare policy textbooks. No additional content analyses utilizing social work policy texts and/or the policy analysis frameworks within them were located by the author.

## Methodology

The Faculty Center Network [FCN] was utilized to draw the sample of most frequently utilized social work policy textbooks in the country for this study. The FCN's rankings are based on demand for a textbook [or largest quantity textbook orders] as collected by the MBS Textbook Exchange, Inc. from roughly 3600 bookstores across the country and in Canada. On a rating system of 0-5, [with 5 being the highest], the author chose all textbooks with a rating of 4 and above for this sample. A ranking of 4 signifies that texts chosen for this sample fell in the 95.5-98.7 percentile in terms of demand. The percentile demand is determined by dividing each textbook order in a subject category by the largest order (Faculty Center Network, 2015).

The author conducted 2 searches of the FCN's title listings during the summer of 2015. Both searches utilized the general index of Social Work and Social Welfare. The first search utilized the sub-category of Welfare, within which 10 sources emerged with a ranking of 4 or 5. The second search utilized the sub-category of Social Work Policy/Guidelines and yielded 7 sources, four of which overlapped with sources from the first search. Thus, a total of 13 texts with a ranking of 4 or 5 were found. Six of these texts were eliminated, as they did not meet the inclusion criteria (see below), resulting in a total sample of 7 texts.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria for a textbook's admission to the sample required that: (1) the textbook must be a social policy textbook, assumedly used in undergraduate or graduate social work policy courses, the title of which includes two or more of the following words: Social+Welfare+Policy; (2) the text had to include a section or chapter on policy analysis; (3) direct practice texts, policy statements, specialized policy texts in child welfare or poverty, and/or texts with a primary focus of social welfare history were inadmissible; (4) texts that combined an introduction to social work and social welfare were also ineligible, as these were assumedly introductory social work texts. The exact edition of the text as listed on the FCN website was utilized for this study, even if a more recent edition was currently available.

The units of analysis for this study were: (1) the narrative in each text regarding how problems are viewed; and (2) how the problem was analyzed in the policy analysis framework in the text. In all but two of the seven texts (Barusch, 2015; Blau & Abramovitz, 2014), the framework was a page or more of bulleted or numbered questions placed in subcategories that were usually offset from the rest of the chapter in a separate box or encapsulation. The questions below were directed toward the content in the framework, but sometimes clarification or elaboration of the content was sought and garnered from the text outside of the framework. This was especially true in the two cases mentioned above (Barusch, 2015; Blau & Abramovitz, 2014), where there was no encapsulated framework.

The author first investigated the major differences between and critiques of objectivist and social constructionist perspectives on social problems from the sociological literature (e.g., Best, 1995; Blumer, 1971; Spector & Kituse, 1987) and placed them in a table side-by-side. The literature presented three major distinctions between the paradigms, which the author posed into questions 2-4. The author searched the frameworks for information that responded to the questions and relied on the manifest language used by the author in the framework or in the attending narrative to answer the questions:

- Question 1: What is the author's definition of a social problem in the narrative of the text? (Objectivists define problems as objective conditions that remain fixed and

Table 1: The problem in policy narrative and policy analysis

Q1: What is the author's definition of a social problem in the narrative of the text?	Q2: Who should define the problem when analyzing policies?	Q3: What questions/ criteria does the problem analysis include?	Q4: Are contextual influences considered in the problem analysis?
<p><i>Bartusch (2015)</i></p> <p>No declarative definition of social problems could be located, however, examples are provided. Includes two approaches to understanding problems in a policy context: (de Swaan, 1988) and Chambers (2000). De Swaan (1988) identifies "3 conditions that facilitate collective solutions to personal adversity" including that the "external effects" of a problem must be recognized by some "other" (p. 93).</p>	<p>Invoking Chambers (2000), author advises student to begin defining a problem by describing the affected population, and then demographic features and historic trends. Author then advises student to "identify ideology and values embedded in popular definitions of social problems" (p. 94).</p>	<p>Invoking Chambers (2000), problem analysis includes: 1) problem definition; 2) causal analysis; 3) identification of ideology and values; 4) consideration of winners and losers (p. 94).</p>	<p>In Chambers' (2000) model as presented, ideology and values appear to be the only contextual forces affecting problem analysis.</p>
<p><i>Blau &amp; Abramowitz (2014)</i></p> <p>"Social problems are public 'needs' that are identified, defined, and then explained through the use of a theory. Who defines these needs—elites or mass popular pressure—and how the theory explains them usually point the way toward the range of possible solutions" (p. 17).</p>	<p>Student is advised to consider how problems are constructed, by answering 4 distinct questions about social problems utilizing a social constructionist perspective. Three elements are involved in constructing a social problem: choosing it; framing it; and offering an explanatory theory (p. 5).</p>	<p>Four key questions include: 1) "how do social problems get constructed; 2) who gets to construct them; 3) how does the construction of a social problem help to create a social policy that shapes what social workers do; 4) how do social policies change over time" (p. 5)?</p>	<p>Somewhat. The problem context shaping the policy is woven into chapter subsections [social change triggers and context] in Chapters 8-12 which cover income support, jobs and job training, housing, health care, and food and hunger. The chapter on Ideological Perspectives and Conflicts discusses how ideology shapes "the definition of need" (p. 147).</p>

Chaplin (2014)

Invokes Chambers and Wedel's definition (2009), "social problems are concerns about the quality of life for large groups of people that are either held as a broad consensus among a population and/ or voiced by social and economic elites" (p. 2).  
 "The social problems that typically guide policy and program development are socially constructed" (p. 173).

Author advises [student] to view problem as "policy makers and the public understood (it) at the time the policy was made" (p. 169).

In policy analysis framework, examination includes:  
 --how the problem or need was defined and documented.  
 --how values and self-interest shaped the definition and documentation.  
 --which causal theories have been developed based on the definitions of social problems and what consequences are ascribed to the problem so defined (pp. 175, 203).

Yes. Policy analysis framework (p. 203) includes questions regarding the historical approach to the problem and consideration of its cultural, political and economic contexts, the key players, and how the definitions of the problem/need changed over time.

DiNitto & Johnson, (2012)

No declarative definition of social problems could be located. Authors offer a critique of the rational approach, stating that "problems cannot be defined because people do not agree on what the problems are..." (p. 7).

Two problem analysis questions are contained in authors' "rational model of policy analysis" 1) "how is the problem defined; 2) what is the nature or cause of the problem" (pp. 28-29).

Acknowledges that "(p) olitical ideology and special interests, the mass media, and public opinion all play roles in problem identification" (p. 13).

Advises that policy analysts should not impose own definitions of the problem, yet "the task of crafting some kind of workable definition falls to policy analysts..." (p.28).  
 Analysts may use different definitions or measures of the problem to consider varying effects of a policy proposal, and these definitions are open to debate.

One question in the analysis; "What is the nature or cause of the problem?" includes consideration of the "social, economic, political, environmental, health or other conditions that spawned the problem" (p. 29).

Table 1: The problem in policy narrative and policy analysis, continued from previous page

Q1. What is the author's definition of a social problem in the narrative of the text?	Q2: Who should define the problem when analyzing policies?	Q3: What questions/ criteria does the problem analysis include?	Q4: Are contextual influences considered in the problem analysis?
<p><i>Karger &amp; Stoesz (2014)</i></p> <p>No declarative definition of social problems could be located. "The relationship between social problems and social welfare policy is not linear, and not all social problems result in social welfare policies" (p. 5).</p>	<p>Guided by historical information, the student-analyst defines the problem, and is advised to "acknowledge own values, while at the same time basing the analysis on objective criteria" (p. 28). "The analyst must be familiar with the nature, scope and magnitude of the problem and with the affected populations" (p. 30).</p>	<p>Policy analysis model begins with three historical questions relating to the problem: 1) What historical problems led to the creation of the policy; 2) How important have these problems been historically; 3) How was the problem previously handled" (p. 29). The problem description section includes: 1) "What is the nature of the problem; 2) How widespread is it; 3) How many people are affected by it; 4) Who is affected and how; 5) What are the causes of the problem" (p. 29)?</p>	<p>Somewhat. Policy analysis model begins with three historical questions relating to the problem: 1) What historical problems led to the creation of the policy; 2) How important have these problems been historically; 3) How was the problem previously handled" (p. 29). Though student is advised to consider the ideological assumptions underlying the policy and the target population (p. 30), the ideology of the problem construction is not considered.</p>
<p><i>Popple &amp; Leightinger (2015)</i></p> <p>No declarative definition of social problems could be located. "The definition of the problem addressed by a social welfare policy may be vague and obscure, sometimes even misleading" (p. 79). "</p>	<p>The authors instruct that policy analysts are in charge of problem definitions, that they begin "with formulating the problem and proceed to stating the hypotheses, developing data collection procedures, collecting and analyzing data, drawing conclusions and generalizing from the results" (p. 53).</p>	<p>The first section of the framework [delineation and overview of the policy under analysis] (p. 31) asks "What is the nature of the problem being targeted by the policy? How is the problem defined? For whom is it a problem?"</p>	<p>Yes, somewhat. The outline addresses the historical context of the problem (p. 32); "how has this problem been dealt with in the past?" and "what does history tell us about the effective/ ineffective approaches to the problem being addressed?" This section also asks which people or groups initiated, promoted and opposed the policy, [but does not ask for their problem constructions or claims.]</p>

The definition of social welfare problems is largely socially constructed ... (p. 83). Authors warn against viewing social problems as objective conditions and invokes Spector and Kituse's (1987) social constructionist view that social problems are defined as the activities of individuals or groups making claims with result to some assumed condition and are accepted or rejected based on the power or skill of the claimsmaker (p. 80).

Segal (2013)

No declarative definition of social problems could be located. Acknowledges the subjective nature of problems, "Often, social conditions are viewed as a problem by some, but not all members of society. An issue gains acceptance as a social concern when more and more people, social groups, and policy makers define it as a social problem" (p. 96).

The analyst must also engage in 1) "assessment of the completeness of the knowledge regarding the problem; 2) what we know about the population affected by the problem" (p. 81). The "social analysis" section of the authors' framework (p. 32) poses 7 questions [5 including the problem] that require the analyst's judgment. [See next column].

Student is advised [in the text] to answer a number of questions to clarify problem definition. Questions include "what is the definition of the problem? Are there competing and conflicting definitions of the problem;" "what is the extent of the problem;" and "who is defining it as a social concern at this point of time." [Acknowledges that "values and ideological leanings color how the issue is viewed" (p. 96).]

The "social analysis" subsection asks 1) "how complete is our knowledge of the problem; 2) are our efforts to deal with the problem in accord with research findings; 3) what population is affected by the problem; size, defining characteristics, distribution? 4) what are the major social values related to the problem and what value conflicts exist? 5) what are the hypotheses implicit or explicit in the statement of the problem and goals" (p. 32)?

Questions in the framework include what is the problem; its definitions, the extent, who defines it as a problem; who disagrees; what are the conflicting social values and beliefs; underlying causes and factors; and the groups affected by the problem. In subsequent sections of the analysis, questions are included as to how the social problem changed, was supposed to be changed, and if the problem decreased (p. 100).

Somewhat. There are no specific directives in the framework to consider the historical, economic, and political forces affecting problem definition/ construction. However, the framework includes a subsection on Power Imbalance or Struggle that considers who has power [it does not state if that means 'power to define' problems], and a section on Public Reaction which alludes to social context asking about the views [but not the competing problem constructions] of voters, non-voters, upper and lower income classes, dominant and minimal values and beliefs, and how the media covers and portrays the issue. [In prototypes on immigration and TANF, there is no mention of competing definitions of the problem as recommended in framework (pp. 103-105).]

constant over time. Constructionists define problems as inventions or activities whose definitions are fluid, temporal and negotiated.)

- Question 2: Who should define the problem when analyzing policies? (Objectivists leave the problem definition to the expert or expert literature. Constructionists leave the definition to social discourse or successful claimsmakers that "won" control of the language or typification of the problem.)
- Question 3: What questions/criteria does the problem analysis include? (Objectivists ask questions relating to the problem's chronicity, scope, severity, typologies, causes and solutions, and populations affected. Constructionists ask why problems emerge or reemerge at a particular time, how they are represented or framed at those times, and who brought attention to them, or made a claim).
- Question 4: Are contextual influences considered in the problem definition/analysis? (Objectivists tend not to include the influence of context in problem definitions since problems are considered objective conditions that are ideologically neutral and unchanging over time. Constructionists consider how historical, political, economic, ideological, and social forces shape how social problems are framed and perceived.)

### *Limitations*

Some limitations of this study include the small sample size that inherently limits the generalizability of the findings to the entire universe of social work policy texts. Another limitation includes that a full-scale content analysis of the entire texts in the sample was not conducted, though references to social problems were searched using the textbook's index. Some relevant information (i.e., content on social constructionism) was discovered unsystematically as a result of searching through the textbook. Efforts were made to present relevant data wherever possible, even if they were found outside of the designated areas of the textbook.

### *Findings and Interpretation*

Table 1 includes a presentation of the data from the seven

textbooks admitted to the sample in alphabetical order. The first column in the matrix asks what is the author's definition of a social problem in the narrative of the text? In five of the frameworks (Barusch, 2015; DiNitto & Johnson, 2012; Karger & Stoesz, 2014; Popple & Leighninger, 2015; Segal, 2013) no declarative definition of social problems by the author could be located. Blau and Abramovitz (2014) included their own definition (p. 17) and Chapin (2014) invoked Chambers and Wedel's (2009) definition. The other five authors made references to social problems and their relationship to social policy without actually offering a definition. Barusch (2015) invoked two authors' approaches (Chambers, 2000; deSwaan, 1988) to understanding problems in a policy context. Of these, deSwaan's approach includes that the "external effects" of a problem must be recognized by some "other" (p. 93). DiNitto and Johnson (2012) asserted that "problems cannot be defined because people do not agree on what the problems are ..." (p. 7); Karger and Stoesz (2014) aver that the "relationship between social problems and social policy is not linear, and not all social problems result in social welfare polices" (p. 5); Popple and Leighninger (2015) acknowledge that the "definition of social welfare problems is largely socially constructed" (p. 83) and invoke Spector and Kituse's (1987) theory of social construction. Finally, Segal (2013) acknowledges the subjective nature of social problems: "an issue gains acceptance of a social problem when more and more people, social groups and policy makers define it as a social problem" (p. 96).

*Interpretation.* Though five of the authors in this study would not commit to offering their own definition of social problems, the referents they use to describe social problems defy the objectivist/rationalist perspective. There is nothing in these references that supports the view that problems are objective conditions that remain fixed and constant over time. Instead, their references support a view of problems as subjective conditions whose definitions or constructions are fluid, temporal and negotiated and that someone or some group, assumedly with power, defines as a problem. Even for those authors invoking Chambers (2000) or Chambers and Wedel (2009), there is acknowledgement that how problems are perceived and explained is highly variable depending on the

viewer.

The second column in the matrix asks who should define the problem when analyzing policies? In four frameworks, the problem definition falls to the student-analyst to define (e.g., DiNitto & Johnson, 2012), while utilizing (historical) information and being mindful of one's own values (Karger & Stoesz, 2014), or the (conflicting) values of others and how they affect problem definitions (Barusch, 2015; Segal, 2013). While Popple and Leighninger (2015) ask, "how is the problem defined?" they also instruct that policy analysts are in charge of problem definitions (p. 53). The other two frameworks posit a social constructionist perspective, postulating that the problem was already collectively constructed and defined by the existing policy (Blau & Abramovitz, 2014; Chapin, 2014).

*Interpretation.* Five out of seven frameworks in this study specify that the student-analyst or expert define the problem in policy analysis frameworks, suggesting a rationalist orientation to policy analysis. Though the student's values or the values of others may be required considerations, it is not always explicit why it is important to consider them. Frameworks that direct students to consider value orientations when defining problems stop short of asking follow-up questions as to how values played a role in constructing the problem and its definition during the policy process. In contrast, the two self-identifiably constructionist frameworks begin with the premise that policies come with problems already collectively defined and framed. In sum, there are conflicting directives to students across texts as to who defines problems and how they "get" defined, which may in part reflect the tensions in the profession and in the field of policy studies between positivist and social constructivist ways of knowing.

The third column in the matrix asks what questions/criteria does the problem analysis include? All texts provided at least some problem analysis questions. However, one text offered the problem analysis framework separately from the policy analysis framework (Blau & Abramovitz, 2014), and one text which did not include a policy analysis framework at all, presented the problem analysis in a separate chapter from the discussion on various policy analysis techniques (Barusch, 2015). Five authors treated problem analysis utilizing objectivist criteria. Barusch (2015), DiNitto and Johnson (2012), Karger

and Stoesz (2014), Popple and Leighninger (2015), and Segal (2013) posed questions including some or all of the following: the nature of the problem; the extent of the problem; the competing definitions of the problem; the demographic characteristics and number of people affected by the problem; and the causes (theoretical explanations) of the problem. Some of these questions required that students make judgments about the problem: "How complete is our knowledge of the problem; are our efforts to deal with the problem in accord with research findings?" (Popple & Leighninger, 2015, p. 32). Also, "Is the social problem changed?" (Segal, 2013, p. 100); and "how important have these problems been historically?" (Karger & Stoesz, 2014, p. 29). Two authors (Barusch, 2015; Chapin, 2014) invoked Chambers' (2000) approach to social problem analysis. Two authors (Blau & Abramovitz, 2014; Chapin, 2014) advised students to employ a constructionist perspective when analyzing problems: "How do social problems get constructed; who gets to construct them; how does the construction of a social problem help to create a social policy that shapes what social workers do?" (Blau & Abramovitz, 2014, p. 5) and "How is the problem or need defined and documented; how have values and self-interest shaped the definition and documentation; what causal theories have been developed based on the definition of social problems and what consequences are ascribed to the problem so defined?" (Chapin, 2014, p. 203).

*Interpretation.* All but two frameworks utilize objectivist questions/criteria for analyzing the problem. This is a curious state of affairs, as mentioned earlier, since most of the authors prescribing objectivist criteria acknowledge the subjective nature of problems elsewhere in the texts, but apparently have not transferred this perspective into problem analysis. Instead, student-analysts are encouraged to use empirical and theoretical literature, or to conduct policy analysis like research (e.g., Popple & Leighninger, 2015) in order to define the problem, the problem's nature, extent or scope, identifying who is affected and how, and a causal analysis or theory of the problem. This guidance is not accompanied by any critique that it may mislead; that empirical, expert definitions are not necessarily objective or ideologically neutral, but are rather interpretations that imply a causal explanation and location for the problem (individual, group or society). Thus, as mentioned earlier,

there is no warning that the student may simply be reproducing the biases of the "experts" (Danto, 2008).

The fourth column in the matrix asks are contextual influences considered in the problem definition/analysis? In two cases, the historical context of the problem as addressed by the policy is included in the framework (Karger & Stoesz, 2014; Popple & Leighninger, 2015). Segal's (2013) policy analysis framework contains some questions indirectly related to the political, economic, and social contexts of problems. One chapter in Blau and Abramovitz (2014) discusses how ideology shapes "the definition of need" (p. 147), and the problem contexts of five specific policy areas are discussed in chapter subsections illustrating the application of their model. Similarly, Barusch's (2015) (separate) social problem analysis section discusses ideological influences on problem definitions, and in separate chapters on specific problems, the historical, political, social, and/or economic context of the problem is explored. More broadly, DiNitto and Johnson (2012, p. 29) include one question in their policy analysis framework requiring consideration of the "social, economic, political, environmental, health or other conditions that spawned the problem." Finally, Chapin's (2014) framework requires a comprehensive analysis of the historical, cultural, political and economic contexts of the problem.

*Interpretation.* Most authors seem to recognize and include one or more influential, contextual forces affecting the problem, but most do not include explicit, consistent and systematic treatment of the problem context throughout the policy analysis. Alternatively, the policy's context enjoys comprehensive interrogation in the frameworks (and in most texts as a whole).

## Discussion and Recommendations

This study was guided by the question, "How are social problems viewed and analyzed in social work policy textbooks?" The data suggest a mixed response, in that a few policy analysis frameworks in this study openly espouse a social constructionist perspective when examining problems, while many others make indirect references to the subjective nature of social problems in their narrative descriptions, but prescribe objectivist criteria when analyzing them. The fact

that most authors avoid directly committing to a definition of social problems, describing rather than defining them, giving examples, or leaving social problems to another scholar to define, may suggest some dissonance between two predominant competing perspectives on social problems in the literature. Still, the results conclude that the majority of frameworks in this study cannot presently equip students with the necessary questions or criteria to capture how subjective definitions of social problems play out in policy.

More telling than the formal data presented here were the inadvertent discoveries made during the data collection process. The first discovery concerned the relatively meager amount of space dedicated to social problems in most policy textbooks. While one text offered a complete chapter on problem analysis, most others offered at most a few pages of narrative discussion. Second, there is a clear bifurcation in the encapsulated frameworks between the problem analysis section (usually presented at the beginning of the framework, assumedly because problem definition initiates policy analysis), and the policy analysis section, each with little to no overlap between them. These separate sections may help students better manage and organize their analysis, but may unintentionally present a view of the problem and policy as artificially disparate, when they are instead inextricably bound in reality and should arguably remain so in analysis. In some texts, a few questions about the problem surface again at the end of the framework concerning "how the problem changed" or "was expected to change as a result of the policy," but assumedly these questions, too, refer to the problem in objective terms. Policies are seldom, if ever, responses to purely objective conditions, as all the policy authors in this study would agree, yet the completed framework that separates an objective problem analysis from a contextual policy analysis yields the false impression that they are.

Bacchi (2007) contends that every problem definition is both an interpretation and an intervention, as definitions invariably predict policy responses by how they represent what is problematic (and unproblematic through gaps and omissions) in the representation of the problem. Thus, there is no such thing as an ideologically neutral problem definition, whatever the source. The definer provides the value

orientation for the problem; in most of the frameworks in the study, it is the expert-policy analyst, assisted by the literature or some source deemed to be powerful or authoritative on the subject. Students are advised to be aware of their value orientations (e.g., Chambers & Wedel, 2005) "while basing the analysis on objective criteria" (Karger & Stoesz, 2014, p. 27). However, this creates a curious paradox. In advising students to access the expert literature to avoid tainting the analysis with their own value orientations, students still inadvertently adopt the expert's value orientations when they adopt their definitions of the problem. Danto (2008, p. 718) comments on the profession's educational approach to policy analysis, "Students use selected ideological frameworks to analyze current social and economic legislation ... set by ... the very law-makers who set up the social hierarchy and economic dominance which creates the social worker's client base" (p. 718). It should be noted that a social constructionist perspective guards against this potential bias. When the student-analyst employs a social constructionist perspective to analyze problems, and by extension their policy responses, they are freed from: (1) having to fulfill the role of expert and decide the definition and nature of the problem as it has already been decided or, in the case of policy proposals, will be decided during public discourse; and (2) tainting the analysis with her/his own value orientations because they are in essence, irrelevant.

Theoretically, the author acknowledges the baggage which accompanies a social constructionist perspective and its predominant critique, i.e., that this view "trivializes the reality of social problems" to mere constructions (Clarke, 2001, p. 12). The author qualifies that objectivist and constructionist perspectives have respective utility in educating social work students. Objectivist criteria are critical starting points in the initial recognition, documentation, and establishment of objectionable social conditions in terms of scope, severity, and its effect on vulnerable populations, especially when those conditions have not yet attained the status of a policy problem. However, when analyzing existing policies, which is the focus of this inquiry, where problem definitions have already been framed and determined, viewing the problem's construction within the discursive context from which it emerged calls for

a constructionist perspective. As mentioned previously, objectivist criteria do not capture problem definitions as framed in policies and how they evolved to reach the point of policy recognition at their respective historical points in time.

A more holistic perspective of social problems in policy texts also contains implications for policy practice. When students adopt the understanding that problem constructions predestine policies, and that this construction occurs discursively in a dynamic and fluid political context, then they can enlist and mobilize affected populations to take their rightful place as social participants at the beginning of the collective process of assigning meaning and directing attention to their reality, allowing them to select the language and compete for the typification that best represents their issues and influences public consciousness. Even strongly institutionalized constructions are "unstable and subject to change" (Schneider & Sidney, 2009, p. 106), and can be deconstructed and reconstructed through conflict and challenge. Discourse has a democratizing effect on power, as it is through discourse that reality is produced and knowledge is redistributed, shifting power from the expert to those who previously were not "allowed to know and to say things" (Clarke, 2001, p. 11). As such, terminology and course content in social policy courses may need to include the art of framing issues for public recognition (Lakoff, 2014).

In closing, the author recommends two modest modifications to begin the shift toward a more systematic incorporation of the acknowledged subjective nature of social problems in policy analysis. First, when analyzing established policies, instead of starting with defining the problem, the student could "walk the policy backward" to the place and time in which the policy was made in order to better understand: the historical, economic and political context in which the problems (re)emerged; the collective understanding of how the problem was perceived; the forces affecting those perceptions and the claimsmakers that competed for control of the problem's language before the political process mobilized to address the problem so constructed. "It is sometimes interesting to go backward in the analysis, looking at the specifics of a policy or program and deciphering what they imply about the perceived causes of the problem" (Barusch, 2015, p. 94).

Second, rather than implementing a complete overhaul of existing policy analysis frameworks, a simple recalibration in the balance between problem and policy may ensure that students weight the multi-dimensional nature of policy and problem construction equally. Karger and Stoesz (2014) identify eight key elements that characterize "well-designed policy frameworks" (pp. 26-27), which with a few simple substitutions (e.g., replacing "problem construction" for "policy") can be adapted to level the two sides, strengthen the problem to policy link, and yield a more organic analysis overall:

- Policy frameworks reflect the understanding that a social problem is context sensitive, and that there are competing frames [substituted for "priorities"] in all policy options.
- Policy frameworks should attempt to take into account the unintended consequences of a particular problem construction [substituted for "policy or program"].
- Policy analysts should consider alternative problem constructions and their implications for present or future resources allocated to a given policy.
- Policy frameworks should examine the potential impact of a problem construction on other social policies, social problems, and the public good. (pp. 26-27)

These criteria will hopefully enable social policy authors to more effectively transfer their cogent arguments for a social constructionist perspective from their narratives into their policy analysis frameworks.

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